

Narod Seroujian

Soan 239B (Sea and Society)

Dr. Nikolas Kosmatopoulos

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The Sea: A Site of Survival and Salvation



24 °C. 2:35 pm. March 22. Dalieh. A warm stream of rays and a cool breeze completing the beauty of a Spring afternoon.

Looking closer at this particular photo, I go back to that amazing day to hear again the Mediterranean waves caressing our boat, the echoes of the Dalieh grottos, the laughs and the chit-chats of my classmates and the misty wind that was blowing through my hair, making it even frizzier. A symphony in its own. At the very center, lies the boat, the tiny “heterotopia par excellence” (Foucault, 1986), our guide through the waters, where my thought drowned, got distracted because of the sea and for the sea. Our boat trip was not the typical excursion nor “let’s have fun on the Mediterranean.” It was first a lesson then a call for action. It taught us a story of privatization and loss of public space with the Beirut coastline as the main actor/victim. It made us rethink and reshape our understanding of the sea as a place for all, but owned by the few. Who owns the sea? Who owns “our” sea?

That minuscule watercraft captured through the lenses of my iPhone represents not only a key for navigation and exploration but a tool of survival that is near and dear to my heart and very existence. It is there that memories come together and give birth to stories of people and even nations. Moreover, besides being a space of struggle, a plateau of cultural diffusion, a crucial site of trade, the Mediterranean, once known as the sea of war, has a deeper value for me, as a proud Musadaghian the great granddaughter of Armenian Genocide survivors. I will tell you the story of my people who view these waters as a site of salvation.



[The evacuation of Musadagh Armenians to Port Said by French battleships, 1915]

Musadagh also known as *Mount Moussa* in English and *Musa Ler* in Armenian, is a mountain in the Hatay province of modern day Turkey. It is situated on the Mediterranean coastline, 18 km to the west of Antioch, near the Sanjak of Alexandretta-Iskandaroun. It was once home to the Musadaghians, ethnically Armenian people who lived and thrived in the six Armenian villages surrounding the mountains.

Unfortunately, the Musadaghians did not peacefully enjoy the beauty of spring in the year 1915. During this time, the Turkish government carried out its systematically planned deportations and mass killings of the Armenian people, later to be recognized as the first genocide of the 20th century. Subjected to orders of evacuation, the Musadaghians chose to fight for their lands and battle against injustice by climbing up the mountain of Musadagh. “The Forty Days of Musa Dagh”, an epic novel by the famous Austrian-Bohemian novelist Franz Werfel, tells the story of these small number of Armenians that courageously ascended the mountain to fight against a huge army of Turkish soldiers. While the men were fighting a heroic battle, the women, children and the elderly were gathered to pray for the lives of these freedom fighters and a salvation from the sea, the Mediterranean waters.

The struggle lasted for forty days, and on the morning of September 14, 1915, the fog cleared from Mount Moussa, uncovering the French battleships that anchored near the seashore. The Musadaghians sent many signals seeking refuge, including white flags, huge flames and most significantly a symbolic red cross flag waving on the mountain top. Upon, noticing the signs, the French naval commanders ordered an immediate rescue. Boats were sent to the shore and the Musadaghians descended their dear mountain, hopped on the rescue crafts, and boarded the French battleship, leaving their old life behind and heading toward a new obstacle in the diaspora. These small rescue boats symbolize the great picture of my ancestors’ survival along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

The black and white photo above portrays the heroic resistance and survival of Musadagh. Not only does the Mediterranean Sea represent the salvation of the, but also carries along its waves the stories of many others across history and struggles of humanity. Floating along the mysterious tides of this beautiful blue body of water, boats of all shapes and sizes, that serve a number of purposes, make it a place of birth and death, peace and war, and a site of resistance and survival.

References:

- Foucault, M. and Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), p.22.
- “Genocide and Evacuation: The Evacuation of Armenian Children from the Ottoman Empire During 1915-1923.” *Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute*, National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_18.php.
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